

The Constant

Do you agree that anything which can be “out” soon, never really had the right to be “in”? Then you are a typical Accuphase customer.

There is probably not a second company on the German hi-fi market which (in the best possible sense) comes close to Accuphase in terms of conservative policy. Because Accuphase has been going down the road together with their local distributor P.I.A. HiFi for 42 years now. What other manufacturer can look back on such a long cooperation with a distributor? Of course, this fits perfectly to the products which, at first glance, look as if no product designer had ever come anywhere near them. But if you take a good look at the accurately sized bevels, the exactly dimensioned switches or the seamlessly integrated heatsinks, you'll realize: it's just the other way round. Save that at Accuphase no one would ever come up with the idea of designing a facelift in such an obvious way that it instantly meets the eye. Just like the technical innovations, which – although they do exist to a high degree – enter the series in a rather evolutionary than revolutionary way. I like this restraint, the rejection of any short-lived fashion, which means that with an Accuphase device you can't recognize the year of construction or even the generation at first sight and will need to do some thorough research to find it out. Another very nice example of this conservatism is that the technical specifications in the brochures are always a bit lower than the actual measured values. These are thus figures which are definitely achieved at all times and not wishful thinking of the marketing department. Apart from undoubtedly very clever business calculations, the attitude behind all this also shows a great deal of respect for the music which shall always remain in the focus, not this or that circuitry or the new design gimmick. Hence with no Accuphase amplifier the user will have to do without tone controls or a loudness circuit, since a moderate adaptation to acoustically non-ideal living rooms will bring much greater enjoyment than a clueless straight signal path ideology, which will miss the mark in many a living room acoustic.

Since I became interested in hi-fi more than 30 years ago, Accuphase has been a constant for me which I didn't understand right away, though. For that reason my small integrated amplifier had to leave me back then, because I drew the wrong conclusions from its neutrality and I was also badly advised, by the way. Because the imbalanced sound of my system, hardly had the Accuphase moved in at my place, was not its fault – it rather demonstrated what was in a sorry state before and after it. Now I know. Back then a dealer had sniffed his chance and seized it by making me redesign my whole system little by little. With an obvious result: it never stopped. If

only I had stucked to the Accuphase ... Many years later the topical incarnation of their smallest integrated amplifier is on a visit at my home and does its – no, not a warm-up. An Accuphase is connected and then used for music listening. Of course, there will be some minor tonal changes here and there during the first few minutes, but unlike other amplifiers you don't have to dance around it to make it sound good.

Except for some details, the E-270 looks like many previous integrated amplifiers of this brand, only the design height and the missing flap to cover all the controls distinguish it from its big brothers. Everything you might need for music listening can be switched and controlled here. All the knobs and rotary controls run smoothly and convey the good feeling of a seemingly infinite durability. The rear panel holds a number of unbalanced ins and outs and also a balanced input, moreover a slot for plugging in the accessory boards typical of Accuphase and two pairs of fat binding posts which, from this generation on, are directly linked to the internal poweramp board.

Inside some genetic material has been borrowed from the upper series. To my mind, the most important point is the volume control called AAVA ("Accuphase Analog Vari-Gain Amp") by its creators. In a purely analog way this circuitry provides no less than 65,536 volume steps by using a combination of 16 voltage/current converters, and this without any channel aberrations, level-related changes of the output impedance or crosstalk interference. I don't know of any other solution with such a finely graded and technically clean functioning. Likewise the power amplifier was given a thorough facelift over its predecessor. A current feedback loop (before it used to be a voltage feedback loop), a more stable power supply and new transistors bring the E-270 a double damping factor and shall increase the phase stability as well.

Since the P.I.A. is a stickler when it comes to briefing the reporting authors, the integrated amp does, of course, not arrive at my home without some backup. To give me an impression as discriminate as possible under optimum conditions, the E-270 is accompanied by the option boards for directly hooking up a turntable or various digital sources and, to top off the package, also a suitable CD player, the DP-560, which, by the way, is really topnotch. But in the first round the E-270 must stand its ground alone and is therefore wired to a Mark Levinson ML 390s and a pair of Spendor loudspeakers. And right here a particular quality of this amp becomes already apparent: in idle mode, even with the volume cranked up high, you don't hear a thing from the speakers. For many listeners this may not be so important, but to me it's a decisive criterion. Only that way I can be sure that not even the most subtle decay of a reverb tail is swept under the (noise) carpet. When finally fed with music, the company's trademark quality of keeping its nose out of everything – even potential flaws –, becomes obvious already after the first few notes.

If something doesn't sound right, you will rarely ever assume that the Accuphase component in the chain might be to blame. But since Spendor and Mark Levinson

can throw in similar qualities, things turn out as they actually should: the software (music) moves into the focus of interest, although I'd rather deal with the hardware (amplification). And so the attempt of a sound description for the E-270 comes more or less to nothing and exhausts itself in a statement of the music I was listening to. However, a common character of all audio samples is a sonic authority which guarantees a perfect overview and a completely stress-free sound image even at higher volume levels and with more complex material.

Also captivating is the spatial imaging, which constantly varies from CD to CD and is always rendered with utmost precision. Certainly this can be credited to the volume control in connection with the good speaker control.

A friend of mine hesitates to judge the heard impressions so positively; for him there's some kind of "brand sound" behind this sovereignty, a stamp which is put on the music. In order to clarify this, the Accuphase goes with us to the studio, where it is connected to the Merging DAC. Already quite a few components with a seemingly detailed rendition hadn't escaped unscathed in the past, when it came to reproducing minimal interventions by a compressor or an equalizer. In such cases one could easily hear that the wealth of detail was only pretended and rather put itself as an acoustic signature in front of the music. From significant graph deflections we work our way forward to ever finer manipulations at the recording studio, and the little integrated amplifier from Accuphase is never stuck for an answer.

For the home music listeners this simply means that the E-270 paints a really clean picture of what goes in as music signals. It doesn't subordinate anything to a brand sound, but reproduces mostly without commenting on what it receives via its inputs. For some hobbyists this may not be a beautiful thought, but for the majority (including myself) this refined honesty is very reassuring.

The optional AD-30 phono board fits perfectly into the mould, after all it exhibits very solid qualities. It should go without mentioning explicitly that also under purely technical aspects everything's alright here. Soundwise the AD-30 behaves utterly inconspicuously, it even appears a tadbit more unostentatious than the amp's other traits. Since an analog setup always poses an equation with numerous variables, the front-switching MC/MM slide-in card restrains itself in a sovereign way with a markedly neutral attitude, thereby granting the analog setup a lot of room for sound shaping. Those who pay attention to a harmonious teamwork between the upstream components, will particularly appreciate this truthfulness and may consider the AD-30 as a true high-class recommendation.

On the other hand, those who prefer digital sources will take a shine on the likewise optionally available digital board. Soundwise the DAC-40 jumps on the same (non-existing) bandwagon of the E-270 with a fine resolution without any harshness. And this it does so well that even established, well reputed standalone DACs up to 2,000 euros may leave again after a shootout. Taking into consideration that the triple-input

DAC board can save a parking space in the rack as well as a power cable plus a pair of signal lines, the digital board for the E-270 is almost a steal.

Based on my latest experience with the E-270, I can't help but wondering what deaf human started the rumour of allegedly boring and undynamical sounding Accuphase devices. Rise times (hence the "true" speed of the amplifier), distortion values, performance figures and other data like channel deviation or separation document on paper what is easy to comprehend with open ears: one can certainly do things in a different way, but hardly any better than with the Accuphase E-270. Just like a good cook, it serves up the natural taste of the ingredients – flavor enhancers are denied access to this kitchen. Good music doesn't need them anyway.

Stefan Gawlick